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ABSTRACT

This article argues that the standard tenets of the teaching of children also apply to the ways in which programs are implemented: they run on tentativeness, flexibility, and problem-solving. How these qualities reveal themselves in five important areas is discussed in the following sections: (1) standards and guidelines for delivering Reading Recovery; (2) a long period of training prepares teachers to be decision-makers; (3) the practicality of lesson components for supporting cognitive processing; (4) the utility of a complex theory of literacy learning; and (5) the theories about children's development which guide Reading Recovery. These things explain Reading Recovery's success in a wide variety of settings as follows: by the end of a series of lessons a successful Reading Recovery child (now able to independently solve many literacy learning problems for him or herself) should be able to use the activities of the classroom to push his or her own knowledge even further. The well-trained teacher will be tentative and flexible in his or her interactions with a range of children, each of whom present somewhat different problems. The cognitive processing and the wide range of competencies developed in the children should prepare them for performance in almost all classroom programs. (SR)

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How is Reading Recovery Able to Be Successful in a Variety of Settings Internationally?

by Marie M. Clay

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How is Reading Recovery Able to be Successful in a Variety of Settings Internationally?

MARIE M. CLAY

This is a question which I am sometimes asked and I thought it deserved some answers. Throughout New Zealand, and several Australian states, in remote and urban areas of Canada, in most states of USA, in Northern Ireland, Wales and England, with a tiny beachhead into Scotland, and in island territories like Jersey, Bermuda and Anguilla, Reading Recovery has responded to the needs of children and the administrative values of many education systems. Our early intervention is like a standard boat tossed into several turbulent rivers and struggling to master the rapids and stay afloat in each of them.

The central tenets of the teaching of children also apply to the ways in which the programme is implemented: it runs on tentativeness, flexibility and problem-solving. These qualities reveal themselves in five areas.

Standards and Guidelines for Delivering Reading Recovery

The standards and guidelines for Reading Recovery guard against shifts towards ineffective practices. Shifts can occur so easily for many reasons, and monitoring research has indicated the ways in which changes can limit Reading Recovery's potential for success. Adaptations may arise because it makes someone's life easier to do things which should adhere to established standard things in ways which are expedient or convenient, rather than adopt less demanding objectives.

Research and experience support the conclusions that the programme standards and guidelines lead to the best outcomes for the most children. Let me give one example. There are recommendations about how many children a Reading Recovery teacher might teach at any one time. A minimum of four is suggested at any one time in the training year, and wherever this is possible in subsequent years. Many people cannot understand why an experienced teacher should not teach only two children. Well, Reading Recovery teachers are decision-makers; they design a series of lessons to suit individual children. When they meet only two children each day over the period of a year they are not challenged to make enough varied decisions and their teaching tends to drift away from the innovative. Enter an exceptionally challenging child and the teacher is not ready for the task ahead. When operated with thoughtfulness and flexibility Reading Recovery standards and guidelines guard against prejudicing any child's chances of learning.

Reading Recovery has been able to work in systems that are large and small, church and secular, public and private, in State Education Departments and in private universities, small and remote, or large and urban. It prepares children for very different classroom programmes, to achieve much the same level of outcomes, and to do this in English and Spanish. Education systems differ and at any one time they are changing in different ways depending on their social and educational histories. Reading Recovery has to acknowledge and work with those differences. Problem-solving the intervention into different education settings is one essential feature of Reading Recovery.

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A Long Period of Training Prepares Teachers to be Decision-Makers

Neither a practical apprenticeship nor an explicit text was considered satisfactory for training Reading Recovery professionals. It was assumed that teachers could understand a new approach in a short course but would they change their daily practice in appropriate ways? An apprenticeship might create some inspired teaching but would teachers be able to put what they did and why they did it into words to share with others? What was needed were new understandings, new practices, different decisions for different children, and a means of sharing new insights and unsolved problems with colleagues. The professional networks of expertise would be very important in Reading Recovery. From the Trainers who train the Tutors/Teacher Leaders, and the Tutors/Teacher Leaders who train the teachers and the teachers who make decisions by the minute in their individual lessons with children, every one has to understand the child, the possibilities and the potential of Reading Recovery to reach its goals for individual children.

Reading Recovery training is thorough wherever it occurs, a year-long period in which teachers must change their practices, as well as their understanding, in a supervised apprenticeship. They must learn to articulate the rationales for children's observed behaviours and for the teaching that must follow, learning to learn from children, and from colleagues.

The Practicality of Lesson Components for Supporting Cognitive Processing

It would be easy to spend an hour with a child having literacy difficulty, but individual instruction while essential is costly. Reading Recovery lessons must be relatively short, (30 minutes), streamlined, brisk, varied, with scope for established skill and knowledge to be consolidated, responses produced at speed with not too much attention, but time to work on new challenges which lift competency to higher levels. Tasks in a Reading Recovery lesson are often given simple labels but a couple of examples may illustrate their complexity.

Re-reading several familiar texts achieves several things: it increases the amount of reading done; it results in much successful processing so that children 'orchestrate' the complex set of things they already do well; it allows for independent problem-solving; recognition is speeded; phrasing is possible; there is attention to print detail; and the stories are enjoyed. Teachers may be working on several of these goals in one lesson.

Writing a sentence or 'story' requires the child to take the first steps towards composing. The production is shared between teacher and child. There is a gradual lift over time in the amount, quality and independence of the child's writing. The child comes to know how texts are compiled from letters and words, that writing involves segmentation of speech, is related to the sounds of speech, can be read, and provides opportunities to demonstrate ways to get to new words. These are simple tasks which call for complex learning. A great deal of learning is being achieved in the thirty-minute lesson, and much of it is clearly learning how to do 'literacy things' which should be useful for more independent work in classrooms. The teacher attends to many aspects of literacy learning. The results should provide an insurance of success whatever the demands of the classroom programme.

The Utility of a Complex Theory of Literacy Learning

In contrast to a simple theory of literacy learning, such as one which rates the learning of phonemic awareness or some other single variable as the first significant thing to learn about literacy, Reading Recovery's complex theory supports the view that there are many parts of literacy processing which can be difficult for children. Different children have different strengths and weaknesses, and there may be many causes of difficulty varying from child to child. One child may have a single difficulty or a cluster of several difficulties. The challenges for the teacher come in making teaching decisions which adapt to these idiosyncratic patterns of competencies. Using a complex theory, Reading Recovery is able to serve both children who have one type of problem and children with several different problems. Some children find that bringing one competency into a working relationship with another competency is nearly impossible, making the integrating of complex behaviours in literacy activities an important part of what Reading Recovery teachers must attend to.

Reading Recovery theories must guide teaching whether the problem stems from one problem, different problems in different children, or multiple problems within an individual child's functioning. While that position is realistic, it is also theoretically frustrating for many people.

The Theories about Children's Development which Guide Reading Recovery

On the day I began these notes I read something in a local newspaper. The reporter had interviewed a primary school principal about five year olds beginning school. She explained how the school expects its first year students to start developing some independence in the way they socialise with other children and the way they interact with adults. Independence is fostered in simple ways to encourage children to solve problems. If Annabel can't find her pencil, her teacher might ask what she thinks she could do about finding it. The example is simple but the principle is important. Reading Recovery theory assumes that the goal of early literacy learning is to have children who can in time read silently and compose and write relatively independently and who teach themselves more by engaging in these

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activities. The constructive child is the one who makes something of the instruction and becomes a fluent processor of printed messages.

How do these things explain Reading Recovery's success in a variety of settings? If we assume that we need constructive children in classrooms who can independently solve many literacy learning problems for themselves, then by the end of a series of lessons a successful Reading Recovery child should be able to use the activities of the classroom to push their own knowledge even further. The well-trained teacher will be tentative and flexible in her interactions with a range of children each of whom present somewhat different problems. The cognitive processing and the wide range of competencies developed in the children should prepare them for performance in almost all classroom programmes.

But here comes another qualification - there must be minor adjustments to tune-in a particular child to the particular demands of his/her classroom teacher in the last few weeks of the lesson series.

At the level of the education system the intake, teaching and discontinuing procedures are easy to manage, the progress of every child is monitored, and quality control measures operate whatever the administrative structure. The ex-lowest achievers must be able to learn within the classroom programme without special instruction, but with an attentive teacher. The cost is what people complain about until they realize that 12 to 20 weeks of a thirty-minute a day programme is probably saving years of special services and much unhappiness.

The challenge for the future is to hold fast to these quality features in an established programme, for the pressure to be less demanding threatens the tentativeness, flexibility and problem-solving principles that have contributed to our current success.

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